

VZCZCXRO2509

RR RUEHHM RUEHLN RUEHMA RUEHPB RUEHPOD

DE RUEHMO #2195/01 1311325

ZNR UUUUU ZZH

R 111325Z MAY 07

FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0155

INFO RUEHZN/EST COLLECTIVE

RUEHYG/AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG 2436

RUEHVK/AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK 2116

RUEAEPA/HQ EPA WASHDC

RUEHC/DEPT OF INTERIOR WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 002195

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DEPARTMENT FOR OES/ENV, OES/OA, and EUR/RUS
INTERIOR PASS TO FWS (KOHL, PERHAM)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: SENV SOCI RS

SUBJECT: MANAGING POLAR BEARS: IT TAKES A VILLAGE

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¶1. SUMMARY: A project aimed at alleviating the pressure of growing human-polar bear interaction has produced promising results in the village of Vankarem, in Siberia's far northeastern district of Chukotka. Concerted local leadership action, with support from World Wildlife Fund (WWF), has led to the creation of a village bear patrol, fueled a revival of villagers' traditional practices, and generated significant regional government interest. Chukotka's indigenous hunters are also eagerly awaiting implementation of the U.S.-Russia Treaty on the Management and Conservation of the Chukotka-Alaska Polar Bear Population, which will legalize limited polar bear hunting in Russia for the first time since 1956. These developments reveal strong levels of civic engagement among the region's indigenous peoples. They open the door to further U.S.-Russia collaborative efforts to manage polar bears and to support indigenous ways of life on both sides of the Bering Strait.
END SUMMARY.

Context: Shrunken Bear Population

¶2. Most of the world's 20,000-25,000 estimated polar bears are located on the territories of Russia, the US (Alaska), Canada, Denmark (Greenland), and Norway. The regional population that roams the northwestern coast of Alaska and eastern Siberia is estimated to have shrunk as low as 2,000. Increased melting of multi-year pack ice, the traditional habitat of polar bears, is pushing more bears inland in their search for food (coastal seal populations). On shore, polar bears risk being stranded for months at a time when the ice recedes, and they are coming into greater contact with coastal villages. An opportunistic species, the bears create major problems when they enter villages in search of food. The rural population of Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, Russia's farthest northeast district and home to just over 55,000 people, remains heavily dependent on reindeer herding, hunting, and fishing. Since 2003, there have been three fatal bear attacks.

Vankarem's Village Bear Patrol

¶3. Recently returned from a ten-day trip to Chukotka with a group of Russian scientists and journalists, Craig Perham of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS; Alaska) and Margaret Williams of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) briefed EST on current efforts to manage polar bears in the village of Vankarem, on the coast of the Chukchi Sea. Perham and Williams visited Vankarem to observe firsthand how Russia's indigenous peoples of the north are addressing increased human-bear interaction. Perham participated in a workshop at Vankarem and shared information and techniques with the local hunters regarding how the FWS deals with polar bear/human

interactions.

¶ 14. Like many villages in the Chukchi region, Vankarem has seen a dramatic rise in the presence of polar bears. As the number of walrus congregating on the coast near the village has increased (up to 30,000) -- so too has the number of bears, with over 185 observed in the Fall of 2006. With WWF support, the residents of Vankarem have established a village bear patrol that works to alleviate human-bear pressure by monitoring polar bear whereabouts, collecting data, and promoting conservation and traditional hunting practices. Headed by two leading village brothers, the patrol has become a central community organization.

¶ 15. In one highly successful initiative, the patrol took 86 walrus carcasses (occasional scavenging food for polar bears) and established a feeding point five miles outside the village. In a two-week period between November and December, the patrol counted 96 bears at the site. One villager aptly pointed to this as "migration correction." Though the village bear patrol possess many of the latest technologies being used in the United States, such as computers and digital cameras, it remains rooted in tradition and uses local resources. For example, patrol members use flare guns or long sticks with pointed ends, that are held at 45 degree angles to resemble walrus tusks, to deter the bears -- rather than shotgun deterrent rounds or vehicles, which are used in Alaska. Perham noted his interest in observing how human-bear interaction is being handled in the Russian Far East because residents in Alaska have faced similar problems.

Radioactive Beacon Worries Village

¶ 16. Another ecological concern for Vankarem is the presence of a nearby navigation beacon that is powered by a radioactive Soviet-era Radioisotope Thermoelectric Generator (RTG). Designed to provide electric power to navigational facilities like light houses and weather stations in remote locations -- more than 700 RTG's remain

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operational or abandoned across Russia. These devices are estimated to be the largest unsecured quantity of radioactive material in the world and are a key focus of DOE's International Radiological Threat Reduction Program. Though powered by a small fuel source (the size of 3-4 coins) that does not usually pollute a wide area -- there have been reports of these installations being torn apart for scrap metal in the impoverished areas of the Far East, causing extensive contamination in the process. Each device has activity levels ranging from 25,000 to 250,000 curries of strontium-90 -- similar to the amount of such material released from the Chernobyl nuclear accident. Efforts to remove RTG's in the region are likely to remain stalled until the GOR settles on an alternative power source that can weather the harsh winters.

Vankarem: Model for Success

¶ 17. Perham and Williams said they were optimistic about the levels of community involvement in Vankarem. During their visit, Perham and Williams met with the village's hunters, visited the local school to view student art and discuss safety, and attended an evening town hall meeting to discuss community polar bear impact. The presence of a female representative from the regional government in the meeting with the village hunters, a setting traditionally reserved for men, again underscores the ongoing mixing of new and traditional in Chukotka's indigenous communities. Steven Lee Myers of the New York Times, who accompanied the expedition, called the community events "an increasingly rare instance of Russian civic political organization."

¶ 18. The Chukotka government has also noted the work being done in Vankarem and an advisor to Governor Abramovich accompanied the group's visit. The regional government is preparing to create a protected area (likely a Zakaznik) for walrus in the vicinity of Vankarem. Building on the success of Vankarem's village bear patrol, WWF intends to expand their program to two neighboring villages in the coming year. One of these villages, Reirkaipi, is

already working to submit a proposal (with WWF assistance) to the Chukotka government to move the local airstrip and establish a low impact zone for walrus.

Village Welcomes Legalized Polar Bear Hunting

¶9. Also aimed at improving the human-bear situation in the Russian Far-East, limited polar bear hunting rights for indigenous hunters in Chukotka are set to be renewed for the first time since 1956. The U.S.-Russia Treaty on the Conservation and Management of the Chukotka-Alaska Polar Bear Population, signed October 16, 2000, is in the final stages of implementation. The next step will be the formation of a joint commission, advised by scientists from both countries, to establish a joint quota for indigenous peoples on both sides of the Bering Strait.

¶10. Russia's quota will be allocated by village. Alaska's experience with a similar quota system with Canada should provide a helpful model for implementation. Russia named their delegates to the commission in July 2006, and the US representatives are expected to be finalized soon. The treaty is supported by many environmental groups because it will reduce the threat of poaching and increase on the ground education and environmental awareness. The hunters in Vankarem are excited about renewing their hunting traditions and strengthening ties across the Bering Strait -- and expressed their strong desire to have the treaty secured as soon as possible.

Comment

¶11. Managing the Alaska-Chukotka Polar Bear population and supporting the region's indigenous peoples are shared priorities for both the United States and Russia. Strong local support for the WWF pilot project in Vankarem, the regional government's involvement, and broad popular support for the coming bilateral quota hunting system bode well for continued U.S.-Russia efforts. A joint population survey of the region's polar bears, to correct current outdated and inaccurate numbers, is one important project that could be addressed by future joint action. Ecotourism, still in its infancy in the Russian Far East, is another potential avenue of cooperation. Chukotka's award-winning official webpage, notable for its highly professional design and comprehensive English text, is already extensively promoting the region's tourist potential -- reflecting the regional government's interest in attracting outside attention.

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